

# North Korea and Benign Neglect

[Doug Bandow](#)

September 19, 2010



The Hermit Kingdom of North Korea

remains an enigmatic curiosity. A major Communist party conference planned for early September has yet to occur and no one knows why. Earlier Pyongyang suggested its willingness to return to the ever-futile six-party talks, yet the prospect of concessions from the North seems even less likely than before. What to do?

For all of its 62 years of existence—except during the 1950-53 Korean War—the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has been a paragon of stability. Only two men have ruled, “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung and his son, “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il. After the elder Kim dispatched his rivals during the 1950s control from the top has been essentially absolute. The DPRK became a totalitarian communist monarchy.

For most of that time the North was only a conventional, though potent, military power. The North Korean threat declined significantly as Seoul raced past Pyongyang in economic strength and diplomatic reach. Today the DPRK is a mere shadow of its neighbor in most measures of international power.

However, for nearly two decades North Korea has been ostentatiously developing nuclear weapons. While the numbers and capabilities of its arsenal remain limited, Pyongyang must be counted as a nuclear state. Neither negotiations nor sanctions have had any discernible impact on the North’s course. Obvious regional discomfort at the prospect of North possessing nuclear weapons was eased slightly by the recognition that the regime matched malevolence with stability. Kim Jong Il obviously enjoyed his Swedish blondes—if not virgins—in this world and appeared to have no desire to trigger a war which he would lose.

Yet stability may now be in increasingly short supply in Pyongyang. Two years ago Kim reportedly suffered a stroke. His brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek, emerged as Kim's most important subordinate—a position recently formalized when Jang was appointed deputy chairman of the Military Defense Commission, which has superseded the Korean Workers' Party as the fount of power.

Moreover, Kim apparently has anointed his third son, Kim Jong-un, as his heir apparent. It took Kim Il Sung many years to move Jong Il into position to assume control on the former's death. Kim Jong Il's stroke apparently convinced the Dear Leader that he had to rush the process with Jong-un, thought to be 27 or 28 years old. The September KWP meeting likely was called to formalize the planned transition.

The process is proving to be anything but smooth, however. A botched currency conversion reportedly led to the execution of the official responsible. Recent personnel shifts have been colored by the suspicious deaths of high-level officials—reportedly due to car accidents and heart attacks. Equally odd was the reported retirement for reason of age of another top Kim confidante in a gerontocratic regime dominated by officials older than the 68-year-old Dear Leader.

Now the conclave of the Korean Workers' Party has been postponed with no explanation. The last KWP conference occurred three decades ago and affirmed Kim Jong Il's position. The most obvious reason to hold a meeting now is to formalize Kim Jong-un's planned ascension. North Korean media reported that the meeting was set for early September and delegates were seen arriving in Pyongyang.

But nothing has happened. A secret conference is inconceivable; the regime routinely uses such events as a propaganda spectacle. So something almost certainly has gone wrong.

Speculation includes health problems for Kim Jong Il, high-level dissension, and the impact of recent flooding. The cause of the delay could be relatively benign. However, few believe that Kim Jong-un will rule unless his father stays healthy for many more years. Too many officials have been waiting too long for their turn to voluntarily turn over control to another Kim, especially another one whose only claim to power is his parentage. Even Jang Song-taek, reportedly tasked with aiding the younger Kim's rise, might decide that he deserves the prize if Kim Jong Il passes away prematurely. And there are other family members waiting in the wings to potentially play a disruptive role: Kim Jong Il's half brother; Kim's current wife; Kim Jong-un's brother and half brother; Kim Jong Il's unacknowledged but presumed influential illegitimate offspring.

Leadership uncertainty understandably increases allied nervousness about the North's possession of nuclear weapons. But potential political turmoil in Pyongyang requires putting the issue on the back burner.

Given the frustrating course of years of international negotiations over the North's nuclear program, there is little reason to expect another round of six-party talks to deliver a different result. Kim Jong Il reportedly has said that without nuclear weapons no one would pay attention to his country. That observation remains no less true today.

Moreover, an unhealthy Kim seeking to develop support for passing power to his son is unlikely to antagonize domestic interests, most obviously the military, which backs the nuclear program. The military plays a key role in the regime and will have even more influence during a leadership transition. Kim is unlikely to face down his generals to satisfy the West.

Kim's immediate successor (or successors) is even less likely to do so. Whoever follows him will lack his authority and will need months if not years to consolidate power. Indeed, the regime could end up with a collective leadership or a bitter and even violent struggle among different

factions allying with their favorite generals. In none of these cases is anyone likely to negotiate away the North Korean nuclear arsenal.

Unfortunately, there are few other options for denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. War is an awful, and likely disastrous, strategy. Sanctions have failed and even stricter restrictions are unlikely to have much impact unless China enforces them. The United States, South Korea and Japan should prepare for a world in which the North is accepted, de facto if not de jure, as a nuclear power.

But they should not let Beijing off of the hook. Washington should work with Seoul and Tokyo to develop an offer for a “grand bargain,” a package of diplomatic and economic benefits should the North agree to abandon its nuclear weapons program and accept international inspections. Then the allies should present the proposal to the Chinese government and request the latter’s support.

If Beijing agrees—and indicates its willingness to use its influence on the DPRK—then another round of six-party talks would be worth holding. If not, the United States should adopt a policy of benign neglect. Any North Korean military action against American forces, or sale of nuclear materials to a terrorist organization, would be met with ruinous retaliation. Otherwise, Washington would busy itself elsewhere, leaving developments on the peninsula up to South Korea which, after all, has far more at stake in developments north of the DMZ. Once the leadership transition in North Korea is complete, the United States could take another look at more active engagement.

What’s going on in Pyongyang? Few people outside—and probably even inside—North Korea’s capital have any idea. America has little to gain from continuing to press forward on nuclear negotiations. Instead, Washington should back away, leaving policy on the Korean peninsula largely up to the South Koreans.